

Sketch

Volume 25, Number 3

1959

Article 4

River Man

Tom Lampe*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1959 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

River Man

Tom Lampe

Abstract

The smell of fried bacon still hung in the air as John finished clearing off the table. He threw a few scraps to Butch, who gobbled them up ravenously...

River Man

THE SMELL OF FRIED BACON still hung in the air as John finished clearing off the table. He threw a few scraps to Butch, who gobbled them up ravenously. The pot-bellied stove in the corner of the room had barely begun to take the chill off the early-morning, spring air.

John padded over to the cabin window, and stretched as he looked over the broad expanse of the Mississippi, lying clear and calm in front of him. The morning fog had barely begun to lift, but already a few boats were moving on the placid waters, leaving long, widening, silver ribbons behind them.

"Yes, suh, it's gone be a mighty fine day fo' runnin' the lines," he said matter-of-factly.

Butch had finished off the scraps and now eagerly stood before John, his tail wagging furiously. Butch's little, brown eyes looked pleadingly at his master.

"Well, now. What yo' in such a dither about?" John chuckled and leaned over to pet the dog.

"All right," he said. "Jus' a minute. Ah've got sumpthin' to do fust." He shoed Butch out of the way and ambled slowly over to the kitchen table. He reached a gnarled, brown hand into the hip pocket of his overalls and withdrew once again the yellow piece of paper. It was already dirty and worn, although he had only received it the day before. The creases were worn almost through from folding and unfolding it so many times.

"Dear Pa," it began, "how are you? We are all fine here." His eyes darted quickly over the words that he had almost memorized. Mae went on and on about the kid and Clarence, but finally came to the purpose. "And so, Pa, we'd like

you to come off the river and move out here on the farm with us. We've got lots of room, and we know you'd like it out here with us. This is your home for as long as you want it to be. Your loving daughter, Mae."

He had been on the Miss' all of his life, and now they were asking him to leave it. He couldn't do that. No more than he could take a knife and cut off his hand. It meant that much to him. He had been here too long, and the river was a part of him. It had been a long time since he had seen Mae, though. She had left home when just a kid. It was right after her mother died. And the grandchildren. Well, doggone! They was probably growed up already, without even knowin' their grandpa. The years had passed by and he had scarcely noticed them go. He was gettin' old, too. Lately he was gettin' pains haulin' in the lines, and there had been a time when no one beat John out on the river come morning. Maybe leavin' the river might not be a bad idea after all. The trouble was, the feelin' was still there.

Butch was growling impatiently now and pulling on the worn cuff of John's overalls.

"All right. All right. I'm a comin'," he said as he became aware of the dog.

John pulled on his boots, and they both went outside and headed for the bait shack. Butch stood outside the shack, growling menacingly as he watched John scoop the crawdads into the bait bucket. He hadn't gone inside for a month now, ever since he had ventured too close to a strong-pincered crawdad.

Soon John had loaded the gray flatboat, and they were on their way. Cold spray flew back at John as the old boat knifed its way through the brown water. Butch, as usual, was at the front of the boat, leaning forward into the wind. The small outboard motor ran with a high-pitched whine, sending its vibrations through the boat.

It was a funny thing about the river, John thought. From a distance the water looked all shiny and blue, but when you got close, it wasn't blue any more. Instead, it was brown, like chocolate, from the dirt it carried with it clear down to the Gulf. And it had a rich smell, strong and powerful. It

smelled alive. Of course, John and a few others who lived on the river knew that it was alive. It was like a woman, that river. With a thousand moods. Sometimes it was docile, like now. Placid and calm. But he had seen it at flood time too, with the river rushing and foaming in a yellow-brown fury, sweeping everything before it. Times had changed since he had first come here, but the river, with all its moods and facets, was still the same. Nothing changed it. Instead, it changed things.

John guessed that's why he loved it. It was strong. It would be here long after his bones were rotting in the grave. It was like knowing someone who would live forever. It was God. And they wanted him to leave it. He wouldn't. He couldn't.

Soon they reached the shiny gallon can bobbing on the water that marked the beginning of the trot line. The line went on fifty feet or so, with long, sharp hooks hanging along the length of it. John fished under the can with the pike pole and finally hooked the line. He pulled it up carefully with the pole and reached out with his other hand to take it. It snaked out from the surface in front of him for about fifteen feet and then angled back into the depths.

John held the line tightly, weighing it carefully in his hand. He waited for the tell-tale jerking of a catfish or a carp. Usually there was a jerk if any fish were on the line. Sometimes, though, if a fish were tired from struggling against the sharp barb of the hook, it would just wait there quietly until it felt itself being lifted out of the water. Now John felt nothing.

He started pulling harder, gradually working the boat along. The line of sharp, dangling hooks passed by him as his huge hands worked back and forth. He had gone about half way along the line when he felt the tug. A few feet in front of him he could see the brown swirls as the fish struggled desperately against the line.

"It's a big one! It's a big one!" he called to Butch. The dog whined in anticipation and scampered back and forth along the length of the boat.

My! My! Oh, yes, it's a big one, John thought. Its stone-

gray tail now was splashing through the surface. Seventy . . . eighty pounds, he guessed. The huge fan of its tail emerged again from the surface, now all froth and foam. The tail slapped on the surface with a sharp crack. Butch started barking at the wild, desperate thing by the boat.

"Oh, God! Oh, God A'mighty! It's big! It's huge!" John reached for the gaff. Leaning over the side of the boat, he fished in the swirling waters to sink home the gaff. He could see the gills of the catfish, two living wounds as they opened and closed madly. Then he struck! The fish seemed to fight with even greater fervor. Its ugly head banged into the side of the boat. The water was turning crimson and frothy. The decision he had to make was forgotten by John now. That was unimportant. There was only this thing, this wild fighting thing and himself.

John pulled at the fish trying to haul it over the side of the boat. Its body gyrated furiously as he pulled it out of the water.

Dear God! Oh, that pain! John felt the sharp, familiar stabbing pain in his chest. The fish. He had to land the fish. He pulled harder. Everything was going black. It hurt. Oh, dear Christ! The pain! Everything was spinning. He was hot. . . choking. The water looked cool and deep. He hurt all over. His knees collapsed.

Later that day they found the boat with Butch the only occupant, crying for his lost master. Jeff Langley it was who found the faded piece of yellow paper in the boat. It was water-stained and barely readable, but they finally made it out. They all shook their heads and said it was a shame. . . a shame old John didn't go home while he had the chance.

— *Tom Lampe, Sc. Sr.*